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ABSTRACT

Elementary and middle school teachers can employ storytelling techniques using selections such as episodes from children's novels to encourage even the most reluctant readers. The telling of complete episodes from novels causes reluctant readers to identify with a character and brings them into the plot. The Storytelling Episode Model (SEM) is a step-by-step procedure for learning to tell parts of a novel that can stand alone. The SEM serves as a guide for writing an episode script that the storyteller can refer to when the episode is being learned for telling. Memorizing an entire episode is not advisable--telling the events in the storyteller's own words permits revising the telling with each practice. Depending on the time allotted and the response of the audience, the story can be expanded or condensed. Through storytelling, students experience new genres and new worlds beyond their prior interests and habits in reading. (Contains a 24-item list of children's literature cited and 6 references.) (RS)

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Motivating the Reluctant Reader: Using the Storytelling Episode Model

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Lewis walked down the long hall. It seemed to take forever. At the other end he emerged into a room full of yellow light. There were pictures in heavy gilt frames on the wall; there was a mantelpiece covered with a wild assortment of junk; there was a big round table in the middle of the room, and over in the corner was a gray-haired woman in a baggy purple dress. She was standing with her ear to the wall, listening.

—From ***The House with a Clock in Its Walls****, by John Bellairs*

THE ABOVE IS A SCENE FROM A FAST PACED NOVEL WITH A suspenseful plot that many older elementary and middle school students would enjoy once they began reading the story. How do we motivate today's students to want to find out why the lady in the purple dress has her ear to the wall and what will happen to Lewis? One way to immediately capture their interest is to share an episode from the novel through storytelling. If we tell Chapter 1 of Bellairs' novel in the form of a story, we will leave the listeners in such suspense that even if no additional episodes of the book are told, many students will express a desire to read the book on their own.

Many studies report the benefits of storytelling based on short stories such as folktales, myths, and legends (Strickland, 1973; Farnsworth, 1981; Roe, 1985; Roe, 1986; and Peck, 1989). This article describes how elementary and middle school teachers can employ storytelling techniques using longer selections (e.g. episodes from children's novels) to encourage even the most reluctant readers to pursue such contemporary titles as Lynne Reid Bank's ***The Indian in the Cupboard***, Gary Paulsen's ***Hatchet***, and Jerry Spinelli's ***Maniac Magee***.

Never before has the reading market offered youth a greater variety of children's literature. Children's book sales more than doubled between 1980 and 1985, and by the end of 1990, they doubled again. Yet, even with the recent movement toward literature-based reading programs, one of the greatest challenges for teachers is still how to motivate older elementary and middle school students to be active, excited readers. Educators are well aware that many children can read but choose not to. Still others may have mastered the skill of reading, but they do not pursue reading for their personal enjoyment. If a positive attitude toward reading can be developed in students, they will be more inclined to read. Using storytelling with episodes from novels is one way to encourage students to become lifelong readers.

Storytelling Based on Novels

Storytelling is an activity distinct from reading a story, either silently or aloud. In this case, it is a redesign of written matter in the oral tradition, relying less upon memorizing the text than upon framing it in another idiom. Unfortunately, storytelling is an activity that older students rarely have the opportunity to experience due to the length of novels. Educators want students to become eager readers, but they seldom use storytelling to "sell" books to them.

The telling of complete episodes from novels causes reluctant readers to identify with a character and brings them into the plot. Episodes that lead to the major climax in novels often have their own individual climaxes. The novel has an overall plot, but each episode has its own subplot. Numerous options exist. For example, the novels may have humorous and mischievous characters such as Alex Frankovitch from Barbara Park's ***Skinnybones***, or Irma Baumlein from Carol Ryrie Brink's ***The Bad Times of Irma Baumlein***. The plot may lead the listener from one adventure to another as in Gary Paulsen's ***Hatchet*** or Avi's ***The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle***. Perhaps one of the themes might be friendship, as represented in Barbara Cohen's ***Thank You, Jackie Robinson*** and Katherine Paterson's ***Bridge to Terabithia***.

Storytelling Episode Model

The Storytelling Episode Model (SEM) is a step-by-step procedure for learning to tell parts of a novel that can stand alone.

Storytelling Episode Model (SEM)

1. Title: _____
2. Author: _____
3. Chapter(s) & Pages: _____
4. Episode Summary: _____
5. Sequence of Events: _____
6. Episode Climax: _____
7. Episode Resolution: _____
8. Introduction to Next Episode: (Optional) _____

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The SEM serves as a guide for writing an episode script that the storyteller can refer to when the episode is being learned for telling. The SEM also serves to refresh the storyteller's memory if time has elapsed since the last telling, and it forms the basis for including additional episodes from the novel. The model can be used by anyone who is interested in sharing good literature with students. It is especially appropriate for educators (e.g. librarians, reading specialists, special education teachers, and teachers who work in an integrated classroom) who meet with several groups of students during the year.

Episode Selection

The SEM is easy to apply to almost any children's novel that is enjoyed by the teller and will intrigue the listeners. The elements of a good story for telling are an exciting but uncomplicated plot, a few interesting characters, a colorful setting, and just enough details to hold the audience's interest. The selections for telling may include single chapters or combinations of two or more chapters. They can include all genres and levels of readability. The following are some examples.

Suggested Titles for Telling by Genre

At the Sound of the Beep MY RF SI
The Bad Times of Irma Baumlein FM HM RF
Bridge to Terabithia N FM RF SI
The Cay AD HF SI SV
Charley Skedaddle AD HF SI SV
Charlie Pippen FM RF SI
The Chocolate Touch FM HM MF
The Crossing AD RF SI SV
The Devil's Arithmetic AD HF SI SV
Hatchet H AD RF SV
The House with a Clock in Its Walls AD MF MY
The Indian in the Cupboard AD FM MF SI
James and the Giant Peach AD HM MF
Maniac Magee N AD HM SI SP SV
Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIHM N AD MF SI SV
The Night of the Twisters AD FM RF SV
Shiloh N FM RF SI
The Sign of the Beaver H AD HF SI SV
Skinnybones FM HM RF SP
Slake's Limbo AD RF SI SV
Thank You, Jackie Robinson FM RF SI SP
True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle H AD HF MY SI SV
Tuck Everlasting AD FM MF SI
Twenty and Ten AD HF SI SV

KEY:
N: Newbery Award Book
H: Honor Book
AD: Adventure
FM: Family
HF: Historical Fiction
HM: Humor
MF: Modern Fantasy
MY: Mystery
RF: Realistic Fiction
SI: Social Issues
SP: Sports
SV: Survival

Applying The Model

Bellairs' ***The House with a Clock in Its Walls*** has many episodes that can stand on their own for telling. The episode described here is the telling of Chapter I.

Episode Script:

1. Title: ***The House with a Clock in Its Walls***
2. Author: John Bellairs
3. Chapter I, Pages 3-21
4. Episode Summary: After the sudden death of his parents, Lewis, a chubby ten-year-old boy, is introduced to his new life with an eccentric uncle who lives in a mansion in the small town of New Zebedee, Michigan. Although he misses his parents, he quickly learns to enjoy his new life.
5. Sequence of Events: Lewis' life changes dramatically when his parents are killed in an auto accident. He is very anxious because he will make his new home with an uncle he has never met. Lewis heard that his uncle plays poker, drinks, and smokes a pipe.

As Lewis is trying to get off the bus with his heavy cardboard suitcase, he suddenly meets his Uncle Jonathan, a large man with a graying red beard. While Uncle Jonathan carries Lewis' suitcase to his home, Lewis observes him go into a trance as an iron bell clangs the nine o'clock hour. Lewis stands before his new home and is thrilled that it is a Victorian mansion with three floors and a turret. Once inside, Lewis meets Mrs. Zimmerman, a wrinkled gray-haired woman wearing a purple dress. Strangely, she has her ear to the wall as if trying to listen for something.

6. Episode Climax: At midnight, Lewis becomes aware of the many clocks that fill the rooms of his uncle's home as they all begin to sound. There is something peculiar about the way Mrs. Zimmermann and Uncle Jonathan react as they listen to the clocks.
7. Episode Resolution: After Lewis is shown his new bedroom, he thinks about all the strange and wonderful things that have happened to him since his arrival, and he appears to be quite satisfied with his new home.
8. Introduction to Next Episode: Late that night, Lewis observes his uncle going about the house with a flashlight and pounding on walls. In the next episode the listeners will discover more about the strange behavior of Uncle Jonathan.

This is all that is required to prepare the storytelling episode. However, be sure to select the details that would be of interest to the listeners. Too much detail may cause them to become confused and lose interest in the story.

Learning the Story Episode

Once the SEM script is completed, practice in learning the story begins. First, become familiar with the episode events; begin to visualize them, including details that seem important. It may help to record the text and then listen to it while in the car or while doing chores that do not require concentration. Monitor progress by consulting the SEM script and the original text. Is memorizing an entire episode advisable? Few people have time to memorize an entire text, and with memorization, there is always the danger of forgetting the next line. Telling the events in one's own words permits the option of revising

the telling with each practice. Once the storyteller knows the events, he/she can add words and phrases and begin telling the story to anyone who will listen. Each retelling will be somewhat different from the previous one. The more the story episode is retold, the more confident the teller becomes. One steps away from the written into the oral tradition to draw the listeners into the written work.

Once an episode is learned, it can be saved in a binder or notebook. Other scripts will eventually be added, making it possible for the teller to have several to choose from as the need arises.

Conclusion

What can one expect from reluctant readers who have listened to storytelling episodes from a novel? One measure of success is a student's desire to read the novel. Advise school and public librarians of the novels that will be shared so the books will be readily available. After telling the first episode of ***The House with a Clock in Its Walls*** to classes at a local school, teachers received several calls from students and parents asking where the book could be purchased. Thus, the teller should have one or more copies of the book available.

One of the advantages of storytelling is its flexibility. Depending on the time allotted and the response of the audience, one can expand or condense the telling. If students show they are especially intrigued by the episode, the teller can relate every event that comes to mind, including the climax and ending. Part of the middle and elementary students' success in being able to stay with the novel is that they now have the prior knowledge to comprehend it; they can easily visualize the story's setting, characters, and enough of the plot to carry them through to the end.

Bodart says it well: "The addition of storytelling gives those children who don't have much reading background the chance to experience first-hand just what is meant by 'the pleasure of reading' " (Bodart, 1985, p. 84).

If the only outcome of storytelling is that students have been introduced to a novel they would otherwise not have known, the activity is well worth the effort, but usually the benefits extend far beyond this. Students will experience new genre and new worlds beyond their prior interests and habits in reading. Through storytelling, using episodes from novels, the reluctant reader can be motivated to become a lifelong reader.

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